# SANKEY'S DOUBLE HEADER, By Frank H. Spearman

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THE OLDEST man in the train service didn't pretend to say how long Sankey had worked for the company.

Pat Francis was a very old conductor, but old man Sankey was a veteran when Pat Francis began braking. Sankey ran a passenger train when Jimmie Brady was running—and Jimmie afterwards enlisted and was killed in the Custer fight.

There was an odd tradition about Sankey's name. He was a tall, swarthy fellow, and carried the blood of a Sioux chief in his veins. It was in the time of the Black Hills excitement, when railroad men struck by the gold fever were abandoning their trains, even at way stations, and striking across the divide for Clark's crossing. Men to run the trains were hard to get, and Tom Porter, trainmaster, was putting in every man he could pick up, without reference to age or color.

Porter—he died at Julesburg afterwards—was a great jollier, and he wasn't afraid of anybody on earth.

One day a war party of Sioux clattered into town. They tore around like a storm, and threatened to scalp everything, even to the local tickets. The head braves dashed in on Tom Porter, sitting in the dispatcher's office upstairs. The dispatcher was hiding under a loose plank in the baggage room floor. Tom, being bald as a sand hill, considered himself exempt from scalping parties. He was working a game of solitaire when they bore down on him, and interested them at once. That led to a parley, which ended in Porter's hiring the whole band to brake on freight trains. Old man Sankey is said to have been one of that original war party.

Now, this is merely a caboose story—told on winter nights when trainmen get stalled in the snow drifting down from the Sioux country. But what follows is better attested.

Sankey, to start with, had a peculiar name—an unpronounceable, unspellable, unmanageable name. I never heard it; so I can't give it. It was as hard to catch as an Indian cur, and that name made more trouble on the payrolls than all the other names put together. Nobody at headquarters could handle it; it was never turned in twice alike, and they were always writing Tom Porter about the thing. Tom explained several times that it was Sitting Bull's ambassador who was drawing that money, and that he usually signed the payroll with a tomahawk. But nobody at Omaha ever knew how to take a joke.

The first time Tom went down he was called in very solemnly to explain again about the name; and, being in a hurry, and very tired of the whole business, Tom spluttered:

"Hang it, don't bother me any more about that name. If you can't read it, make it Sankey, and be done with it."

They took Tom at his word. They actually did make it Sankey; and that's how our oldest conductor came to bear the name of the famous singer. And more I may say: good name as it was—and is—the Sioux never disgraced it.

Probably every old traveler on the system knew Sankey. He was not only always ready to answer questions, but, what is much more, always ready to answer the same question twice: it is that which makes conductors gray-headed and spoils their chances for heaven—answering the same questions over and over again. Children were apt to be a bit startled at first sight of Sankey—he was so dark. But he had a very quiet smile, that always made them friends after the second trip through the sleepers, and they sometimes ran about asking for him after he had left the train.

Of late years—and it is this that hurts—these very same children, grown ever so much bigger, and riding again to or from California or Japan or Australia, will ask when they reach the west end about the Indian conductor.

But the conductors who now run the overland trains pause at the question, checking over the date limits on the margins of the coupon tickets, and, handing the envelopes back, will look at the children and say, slowly, "He isn't running any more."

If you have ever gone over our line to the mountains or to the coast you may remember at McCloud, where they change engines and set the diner in or out, the pretty little green park to the east of the depot with a row of catalpa trees along the platform line. It looks like a glass of spring water.

If it happened to be Sankey's run and a regular west end day, sunny and delightful, you would be sure to see standing under the catalpas a shy, dark-skinned girl of 14 or 15 years, silently watching the preparations for the departure of the Overland.

And after the new engine had been backed, champing down, and harnessed to the long string of vestibuled sleepers; after the air hose had been connected and the air valves examined; after the engineer had swung out of his cab, filled his cups, and swung in again; after the fireman and his helper had disposed of their slice-bar and shovel, and given the tender a final sprinkle, and the conductor had walked leisurely forward, compared time with the engineer, and cried, "All Abo-o-o-ard!"

Then, as your coach moved slowly ahead, you might notice under the receding catalpas the little girl waving a parasol, or a handkerchief, at the outgoing train—that is, at Conductor Sankey; for she was his daughter, Neeta Sankey. Her mother was Spanish, and died when Neeta was a wee bit. Neeta and the Limited were Sankey's whole world.

When Georgie Sinclair began pulling the Limited, running west opposite Foley, he struck up a great friendship with Sankey. Sankey, though he was hard to start, was full of early day stories. Georgie, it seemed, had the faculty of getting him to talk; perhaps because when he was pulling Sankey's train he made extraordinary efforts to keep on time—time was a hobby with Sankey. Foley said he was so careful of it that when he was off duty he let his watch stop just to save time.

Sankey loved to breast the winds and floods and snows, and if he could get home pretty near on schedule, with everybody else late, he was happy; and in respect of that, as Sankey used to say, Georgie Sinclair came nearer gratifying Sankey's ambition than any runner we had.

Even the firemen used to observe that the young engineer, always neat, looked still neater the days that he took out Sankey's train. By and by there was an introduction under the catalpas; after that it was noticed that Georgie began wearing gloves on the engine—not kid gloves, but yellow dogskin—and black silk shirts. He bought them in Denver.

Then—an odd way engineers have of paying compliments—when Georgie pulled into town on No. 2, if it was Sankey's train, the big skyscraper would give a short, hoarse scream, a most peculiar note, just as they drew past Sankey's house, which stood on the brow of the hill west of the yards. Then Neeta would know that No. 2 and her father, and naturally Mr. Sinclair, were in again, and all safe and sound.

When the railway trainmen held their division fair at McCloud, there was a lantern to be voted to the most popular conductor—a gold-plated lantern with a green curtain in the globe. Cal Stewart and Ben Doton, who were very swell conductors, and great rivals, were the favorites, and had the town divided over their chances for winning it.

But during the last moments Georgie Sinclair stepped up to the booth and cast a storm of votes for old man Sankey. Doton's friends and Stewart's laughed at first, but Sankey's votes kept pouring in amazingly. The favorites grew frightened; they pooled their issues by throwing Stewart's vote to Doton; but it wouldn't do. Georgie Sinclair, with a crowd of engineers—Cameron, Moore, Foley, Bat Mullen and Burns—came back at them with such a swing that in the final round up their fairly swamped Doton. Sankey took the lantern by a thousand votes, but I understood it cost Georgie and his friends a pot of money.

Sankey said all the time he didn't want the lantern, but, just the same, he always carried that particular lantern, with his full name, Sylvester Sankey, ground into the glass just below the green mantle. Pretty soon—Neeta being then 18—it was rumored that Sinclair was engaged to Miss Sankey—was going to marry her. And marry her he did; though that was not until after a wreck in the Blackwood gorge, the time of the big snow.

It goes yet by that name on the west end; for never was such a winter and such a snow known on the plains and in the mountains. One train on the northern division was stalled six weeks that winter, and one whole coach was chopped up for kindling wood.

But the great and desperate effort of the company was to hold open the main line, the artery which connected the two coasts. It was a hard winter on trainmen. Week after week the snow kept falling and blowing. The trick was not to clear the line; it was to keep it clear. Every day we sent out trains with the fear we should not see them again for a week.

Freight we didn't intend to move; local passenger business had to be abandoned. Coal, to keep our engines and our towns supplied, we were obliged to carry, and after that all the brains and the muscle and the motive power were centered on keeping 1 and 2, our through passenger trains, running.

Our trainmen worked like Americans; there were no cowards on our rolls. But after too long a strain men become exhausted, benumbed, indifferent—reckless even. The nerves give out, and will power seems to halt on indecision—but decision is the life of the fast train.

None of our conductors stood the hopeless fight like Sankey. Sankey was patient, taciturn, untiring, and, in a conflict with the elements, ferocious. All the fighting blood of his ancestors seemed to course again in that struggle with the winter king. I can see him yet, on bitter days, standing alongside the track, in a heavy pea jacket and Napoleon boots, a sealskin cap drawn snugly over his straight, black hair, watching, ordering, signaling, while No. 1, with its frost-bitten sleepers behind a rotary, struggled to buck through the ten and twenty-foot cuts, which lay bankful of snow west of McCloud.

Not until April did it begin to look as if we should win out. A dozen times the line was all but choked on us. And then, when snow ploughs were disabled and train crews desperate, there came a storm that discounted the worst blizzard of the winter. As the reports rolled in on the morning of the 5th, growing worse as they grew thicker, Neighbor, dragged out, played out, mentally and physically, threw up his hands. The 6th it snowed all day, and on Saturday morning the section men reported thirty feet in the Blackwood canyon.

It was 6 o'clock when we got the word, and daylight before we got the rotary against it. They bucked away till noon with discouraging results, and came in with their gear smashed and a driving rod fractured. It looked as if we were beaten.

No. 1 got into McCloud eighteen hours late; it was Sankey's and Sinclair's run west.

There was a long council in the roundhouse. The rotary was knocked out; coal was running low in the chutes. If the line wasn't kept open for the coal from the mountains it was plain we should be tied until we could ship it from Iowa or Missouri. West of Medicine Pole there was another big rotary working east, with plenty of coal behind her, but she was reported stuck fast in the Cheyenne hills.

Foley made suggestions. Everybody had a suggestion left; the trouble was, Neighbor said, they didn't amount to anything or were impossible.

"It's a dead block, boys," announced Neighbor, sullenly, after everybody had done. "We are beaten unless we can get No. 1 through today. Look there; by the holy poker, it's snowing again!"

The air was dark in a minute with whirling clouds. Men turned to the windows and quit talking; every fellow felt the same—at least, all but one. Sankey, sitting back of the stove, was making tracings on his overalls with a piece of chalk.

"You might as well unload your passengers, Sankey," said Neighbor. "You'll never get 'em through this winter."

And it was then that Sankey proposed his double-header.

He devised a snow plough which combined in one monster ram about all the good material we had left, and submitted the scheme to Neighbor. Neighbor studied it and hacked at it all he could, and brought it over to the office. It was like staking everything on the last cast of the dice, but we were in the state of mind which precedes a desperate venture. It was talked over for an hour, and orders were finally given by the superintendent to rig up the Double Header and get against the snow as quick as it could be made ready.

All that day and most of the night Neighbor worked twenty men on Sankey's device. By Sunday morning it was in such shape that we began to take heart.

"If she don't get through she'll get back again, and that's what most of 'em don't do," growled Neighbor, a he and Sankey showed the new rai to the engineers.

They had taken the 566, George Sin lair's engine, for one head, and Burn 497 for the other. Behind there wer Kennedy with the 314 and Camero with the 296. The engines were se in pairs, headed each way, and buck led up like pack mules. Over th pilots and stacks of the head engine rose the tremendous ploughs whic where to tackle the toughest drift ever recorded, before or since, on th west end. The ram was designed t work both ways. Under the coal eac tender was loaded with pig iron.

The beleaguered passengers on No 1, sidetracked in the yards, watche the preparations. Sankey was makin to clear the line. Every amateur o the train had his camera snapping a the ram. The town, gathered in a singl great mob, looked silently on, an listened to the frosty notes of the sky scrapers as they went through thei preliminary maneuvers. Just as th final word was given by Sankey, i charge, the sun burst through th fleecy clouds, and a wild cheer fol lowed the ram out of the weste.n yar —it was good luck to see the sun again

Little Neeta, up on the hill, mus have seen them as they pulled out surely she heard the choppy, ice-bit ten screech of the 566; that was never forgotten whether the service was spe cial or regular. Besides, the head cab of the ram carried this time not only Georgie Sinclair but her father as well. Sankey could handle a slice-bar as well as a punch, and rode on the head engine, where, if anywhere, the big chances hovered. What he was not capable of in the train service we never knew, because he was stronger than any emergency that ever confronted him.

Bucking snow is principally brute force; there is little coaxing. Just west of the bluffs, like code signals between a fleet of cruisers, there was a volley of sharp tooting, and in a minute the four ponderous engines, two of them in the back motion, fires white and throats bursting, steamed wildly into the canyon.

Six hundred feet from the first cut Sinclair's whistle signaled again; Burns and Cameron and Kennedy answered, and then, literally turning the